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ABSTRACT

This digest considers quality in early childhood programs from four perspectives. The top-down perspective, or adults' perspective, on program quality takes into account such program characteristics as adult-child ratio, staff qualifications, and health and hygiene procedures. The bottom-up perspective, or the children's perspective, hinges on whether the children feel welcome rather than captured, accepted rather than neglected by adults or rejected by peers, and whether they find their experiences meaningful rather than boring. Children's feelings about these matters are partly dependent on caregivers' and teachers' practices. A third perspective on assessing program quality is the outside-inside perspective, which considers the quality of relationships among parents and staff, and parents' and staff's goals and values for the children in the program. Finally, the inside perspective on quality examines relationships between staff members, between parents and staff, and between staff and the program sponsor. Each of these four perspectives contributes in a different way to overall assessment of program quality. (BC)

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Multiple Perspectives on the Quality of Early Childhood Programs

Lilian G. Katz

The quality of early childhood programs can be assessed in many ways. Most of the literature on the subject examines quality by identifying selected characteristics of the setting, equipment, and program as seen by adults. Such an approach can be called *assessment of quality from a top-down perspective.* Another way to assess the quality of a program is to take what we might call *a bottom-up perspective* by attempting to determine how the program is experienced by the children. A third strategy, which we could call *an outside-inside perspective*, is to assess how the program is experienced by the families it serves. A fourth perspective is one from the inside, which considers how the program is experienced by the staff responsible for it.

Top-Down Perspective on Quality

The top-down perspective on quality typically takes into account such program and setting characteristics as the ratio of adults to children; the qualifications and stability of the staff; characteristics of adult-child relationships; the quality and quantity of equipment and materials; the quality and quantity of space per child; the number of toilets, fire safety provisions, and so forth; health and hygiene procedures and standards; aspects of working conditions for the staff, etc. There is substantial evidence to suggest that these program and setting characteristics do predict some effects of an early childhood program (Howes, et al., 1992).

Bottom-Up Perspective on Quality

It is reasonable to assume that the important ultimate effects of a program depend primarily on how it is viewed from below. If it is true that the child's experience of a program is the true determinant of the program's effects, assessment of program quality requires answers to the central question: What does it feel like to be a child in this environment? This approach makes inferences about how each child would answer these questions:

- Do I usually feel welcome rather than captured?
- Do I feel that I belong or am I just one of the crowd?
- Do I usually feel accepted, understood, and protected, rather than scolded or neglected, by the adults?
- Am I usually accepted rather than isolated or rejected by the majority of my peers?
- Am I usually addressed seriously and respectfully, rather than as someone who is "precious" or "cute"?
- Do I find most of the activities engaging, absorbing, and challenging rather than just entertaining or exciting?
- Do I find most of the experiences meaningful, rather than frivolous or boring?
- Do I find most of the experiences satisfying rather than frustrating or confusing?
- Am I usually glad to be here, rather than eager to leave?

Each question implies a criterion of quality, stated in terms of a continuum of desirability. When most answers are at the positive end of the continuum, we can assume that the program's quality is worthy of the children. The criteria of quality implied in the questions are based on an interpretation of what is known about significant influences on children's long-term growth, development, and learning.

The older the children served by a program, the longer the time period required for reliable assessment of the quality of daily life as seen from the bottom-up. In other words, a good quality program is one in which, from the bottom-up perspective, experiences are intellectually and socially engaging and satisfying on most days. Such a program is not dependent on drumming up occasional exciting special events. Isolated events experienced in early childhood programs are unlikely to affect long-term development. However, experiences that may be benign or inconsequential if they are rare, but may be either harmful or beneficial if they are frequent or repeated, must be addressed in assessments of program quality (Katz, 1991).

Needless to say, there are many explanations for any answer to the questions listed above, and a program should not automatically be faulted for negative answers. (This is true for each set of questions contained in this digest.) Some of the causes of children's subjective experiences cannot be attributed solely to caregivers and teachers. This assumption concerning the limits of staff accountability implies that all staff are qualified and trained to employ the accepted practices, accumulated knowledge, and wisdom of the profession. This assumption further implies that the profession has indeed adopted a set of standards of practice. The field of early childhood education has already taken important steps in the direction of establishing consensus on standards of practice through the publication of professional associations' position papers on major issues. The most comprehensive such paper is that of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* (Bredekamp, 1987). NAEYC has also issued position statements on testing and curriculum content and assessment. NAEYC's National Academy of Early Childhood Programs and its new National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development is working on establishing consensus on professional standards of practice.

The Outside-Inside Perspective on Quality

Ideally, the assessment of the quality of a program would take into account characteristics of parent-teacher relationships, and

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particularly, the answers of each parent and staff member to such questions as:

- Are my relationships with parents or staff

  primarily respectful, rather than patronizing or controlling?

  accepting, open, inclusive, and tolerant, rather than rejecting, blaming, or prejudiced?

  marked by contacts that are ongoing and frequent, rather than rare and distant?

- Are my preferences for the goals and values for the children treated with respect?

Parents are more likely to relate to their child's caregivers and teachers in positive ways when they understand the complex nature of their jobs, appreciate what they are trying to accomplish, and are aware of the conditions under which they work.

The Inside Perspective on Quality

The quality of an early childhood program as seen from the inside includes three dimensions: colleague relationships, staff-parent relationships, and relationships with the sponsoring agency.

Colleague relationships. It is highly unlikely that an early childhood program can be of high quality unless the staff relationships within it are also of good quality. An assessment of this aspect of quality would be based on how each member of the staff answered such questions as:

On the whole, are my relationships with colleagues:

supportive rather than contentious?

cooperative rather than competitive?

accepting rather than antagonistic or hostile?

trusting rather than suspicious?

respectful rather than controlling?

Good quality environments cannot be created for children unless the environments are also good for the adults who work in them. Of course, there may be some occasions when an environment has been "good" for the children at the expense of the staff (e.g., birthday parties), and some times when the reverse is the case; but on the average, a good quality program is one in which children and adults find the quality of their lives together satisfying.

Staff-parent relationships. The criteria implied by the questions for the outside-inside perspective can also be used to assess staff experience. In a country like the U.S., with a highly mobile and diverse population, it is unlikely that all the families served by a program are in total agreement on its goals and methods: a situation that inevitably leads to some level of parental dissatisfaction and parent-staff friction. The development of respectful and supportive relations between staff and parents of diverse backgrounds requires staff professionalism based on a combination of experience, training, education, and personal values. Certainly parents are more likely to approach teachers positively when teachers initiate respectful and accepting relationships.

Staff-sponsor relationships. One potential indirect influence on the quality of a program is the nature of the relationships the staff members have with those to whom they are responsible. It is reasonable to suggest that, in principle, teachers and caregivers treat children very much the way they themselves are treated by those they report to. (To be sure, some caregivers and teachers rise above poor treatment and some fall below being well-treated.) Assessment of quality from the inside perspective would come from the staff's answers to the following questions:

- Are working conditions adequate to encourage me to enhance my knowledge, skills, and career commitment?
- Am I usually treated with respect and understanding?

Conclusion

The approach to the assessment of quality proposed here raises complex issues that suggest that the early childhood profession is obliged to develop a set of standards of professional practice. Answers to the questions posed for each perspective can also be used as a basis for decisions about modifications to services offered to children and their families. Each of the perspectives contributes in a different way to an overall assessment of program quality. However, because not all responses can be attributed to characteristics of a program, the early childhood profession must continue to work on developing an accepted set of professional standards of practice to which practitioners can fairly be held accountable. Any approach to the assessment of quality requires not only a set of criteria to apply to each program, but some consensus on the minimum standards for each criterion. A start has been made on the development of consensus about appropriate practices. Further discussion of these matters among practitioners, program sponsors and regulatory agencies, and the membership associations is urgently needed.

For More Information

Bredekamp, S., Ed. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8 (Rev. ed.).* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987.

Howes, C., Phillips, D.A., and Whitebook, M. "Thresholds of Quality: Implications for Social Development of Children in Center-based Child Care." *Child Development* 63 (1992): 449-60. EJ 443 501.

Katz, L.G. "Pedagogical Issues in Early Childhood Education," in S.L. Kagan, Ed. *The Care and Education of America's Young Children: Obstacles and Opportunities. Ninetieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Part I.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8.* Washington, D.C.: Author, 1991. ED 426 212.

For information on the societal perspective, which takes into account how the community and society are served by a program, see the original article from which this digest was taken: "Early Childhood Programs: Multiple Perspectives on Quality," in the Winter, 1992 issue of *Childhood Education* (pages 66-71).

References identified with an ED (ERIC document) number are cited in the ERIC database. Documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 825 locations worldwide. Documents can also be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. References with an EJ (ERIC journal) number are available through the originating journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses: UMI (800) 732-0616, or ISI (800) 523-1850.

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